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ABSTRACT

A study is described concerning the ability to recognize sex bias in language. Thirty-three statements were generated containing statements characterized as sex-biased and sex-fair. It was hypothesized that individuals would have a greater degree of difficulty recognizing sex bias in statements which contained common-use terms or terms with no acceptable alternatives. It was also expected that women would be more sensitive to sex-biased statements than men. The subjects, 87 female and 88 male students at two universities, were asked to rate 33 statements using a five-point scale. Results indicated that individuals appeared to have a greater degree of difficulty recognizing sex-biased statements with commonly used terms or terms having no acceptable alternatives. As anticipated, women demonstrated greater sensitivity to six-biased language than men. (Author/AMH)

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Identifying Sex-Biased and Sex-Fair Language[1]

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Abstract

This study concerned the ability to recognize sex bias in language. Thirty-three statements were generated containing statements characterized as sex-biased and sex-fair. It was hypothesized that individuals would have a greater degree of difficulty recognizing sex bias in statements which contained common-use terms or terms with no acceptable alternatives. It was also expected that women would be more sensitive to sex-biased statements than men. Subjects rated each statement using a five-point scale. Results indicated that individuals appeared to have a greater degree of difficulty recognizing sex-biased statements with common use terms or terms which had no acceptable alternatives. As anticipated, women demonstrated greater sensitivity to sex-biased language than men.

As individuals have become more aware of and have developed a greater sensitivity to sex-bias issues, language usage has become a primary focus of sex-equity efforts. In support of this effort, publishers and professional organizations have developed guidelines for the equal treatment of the sexes in their publications (e.g., American Psychological Association; National Council of Teachers of English; American Educational Research Association, McGraw-Hill; Holt, Rinehart; and Winston; and Scott, Foresman and Company).

Research has provided support for the following:

- Words which reflect the male or female sex are readily recognized by most people (Edelsky, 1976);
- Male terms used as neutral terms tend to exclude females (Moulton, Robinson & Elias, 1978); and
- Women tend to be more sensitive to sex bias in language than males (Nilsen, 1976)

The present study was concerned with the use and recognition of sexist language. It looked at the ability of individuals to recognize sex-biased statements was generated which contained sex-biased and sex fair language. In the majority of statements which were sex-biased, the wording exemplified language in common use. For example, statements were included in which the term man or men was used in the generic

sense. The remaining sex-biased statements used words or phrases which were considered to be stereotypic or biased by definition (i.e., chairman, Freshman).

It was hypothesized that individuals would have a greater degree of difficulty recognizing sex-bias in statements which contained sex biased terms that were in common use or for which there were no commonly acceptable substitutes. When asked to rate a statement as to its degree of sex-bias, statements in common use or for which there were no common alternatives would be seen as having a lesser degree of bias than those in which the bias was more obvious. It was also expected that women would be more sensitive to sex-biased statements than men.

Method

Subjects. Subjects consisted of 87 females and 88 males with a median age range of 21-25. The subjects were graduate and undergraduate students at two universities and a professional school located in two large Midwestern cities. A variety of majors were represented including: education, religion, pharmacy, psychology, and general liberal arts.

Materials. The survey consisted of 33 statements.[2] The statements were based on examples of types of sex-based language presented in the guidelines for non-sexist use of

language developed by the American Psychological Association, McGraw-Hill Book Company, and Scott, Foresman, and Company. Both sex-biased statements and sex-fair statements were included. Each statement was rated by the subject as to its degree of sex-bias using the following scale:

5 = Sex-Fair

4 = Moderately Sex-Fair

3 = Undecided

2 = Moderately Sex-Biased

1 = Sex-Biased

All statements were assigned an a priori rating as to the degree of sex-bias reflected in the statements. The process for assigning the degree of sex-bias consisted of three independent ratings of a large pool of statements. 33 statements were chosen for inclusion in the survey.

One of the purposes of the original survey was to stimulate discussion of sex-bias in language; therefore, nine statements on sex-role stereotyping itself were included. The remaining statements varied in content.

Instructions to Subjects. Subjects were asked to participate in the study and were assured that their responses would be anonymous. The only demographic information requested was age and sex. Directions for completing the survey were identical for all subjects.

Listed below are a number of statements. Please read each and determine how it would be described using the following 5-point scale:

5 = Sex-Fair

4 = Moderately Sex-Fair

3 = Undecided

2 = Moderately Sex-Biased

1 = Sex-Biased

Results

To insure the ease of data analysis, responses to all statements were coded so that a rating of "five" appeared as the most desirable response. The closer the group mean was to "five", then, the more positive were the group responses. A series of analyses of variance and *t*-tests were computed to determine significant differences in responses. Age group and sex differences were examined in all analyses. A $p < .05$ or less was used to indicate significant differences. (See Table 1 for Analyses of Variance)

All statements were categorized into two groups: sex-biased and sex-fair statements. Analyses of variance were run to determine whether statements judged as sex-fair and those judged as sex-biased were perceived as such by the subjects. Results were supportive of the a priori ratings

of the statements; that is, statements initially judged as being sex-fair were perceived as being sex-fair by the subjects and statements initially judged as sex-biased were perceived as such by the subjects. Additionally, female respondents appeared to view the sex-biased statements as more sex-biased than did male respondents ($p < .001$).

The 33 survey statements were reassigned into three statement categories: statements containing sex-biased terms in common use, statements thought to be sex-biased in content as well as in language, and those statements judged as sex-equity statements. A series of analyses of variance were performed to examine the differences in responses on statements in each category. The main effect of sex proved to be significant for all three categories. Females rated the statements containing common sex-biased terms ($p < .05$) and statements sex-biased in content as well as language ($p < .091$) as being more sex-biased than males. Additionally, females tended to describe sex-equity statements as being more sex-fair than male subjects ($p < .05$).

The breakdown by age produced significant differences in only the category of statements judged as being sex-baised in content and language ($p < .01$). Men aged 31-35 indicated these statements to be more sex-biased than any other group

of males, while women in the age group 26-30 found these statements to be the most sex-biased of any group of female respondents.

Statements containing sex-biased terminology were further divided into two groups: those with biased terms in common use and those with biased terms not in general use. It was predicted that statements containing common-use terms would be judged as having a lesser degree of sex-bias than statements in which the biased term was not in general use. A t-test was computed and the results indicated that the prediction was in the correct direction ($p < .001$).

Analyses of variance were also performed to examine the differences by sex group on individual statements. All statements thought to be sex-biased indicated significant differences. Results showed that female subjects tended to viewed the sex-biased statements as being more biased than did the male subjects. There were no significant differences for statements considered to be sex-fair. It appears that sensitivity toward sex-fair language existed among those participating in the study.

Discussion and Conclusions

Individuals in the present study appeared to have a greater degree of difficulty recognizing sex-bias in statements containing common use terms. Many terms in the English language reflect a particular sex engaged in an activity or situation. In most cases, these terms were coined at a time when only one sex was primarily involved in the activity (i.e., policeman, chambermaid). Such terminology, regardless of its exclusion of one sex, is still perceived by many individuals to be acceptable, although individuals of both sexes may be engaged in the activity today. Thus, even though individuals may be aware of sex-bias in language, there are many terms which individuals fail to recognize as biased due to habitual, every-day use.

As anticipated, women demonstrated a greater sensitivity to sex-biased language than men. Female subjects were able to judge sex-biased statements as being sex-biased more so than male subjects. The nature of the English language might serve as a possible explanation of this finding. The study by Nilsen (1977) indicated a predominance of "negative" feminine terms. Exposive to such terms might produce an increased sensitivity on the part of females as to the roles and definition of women. Increased attention to women's issues might have further sensitized women to biased language.

This study also produced some evidence that subjects, regardless of gender, were less sensitive to sex-bias in language as the age group increased. For both males and females, the 35+ age group perceived the sex-biased statements as being less biased than the remaining age groups. These individuals were raised in a time period where women's issue were not publically stressed and job/career lines were less fluid. Older individuals may find it more difficult to recognize sex-biased language as a result of differing experiences than younger subjects.

A growing need to re-examine our language for evidence of sex-bias is apparent. Many educators, publishers, and professional organizations have attempted to promote changes in language usage. The use of sex-biased language may serve to restrict opportunities for individuals by specifying one sex or the other. If there is to be equality, then our language itself should reflect and foster equality, rather than promoting the status quo.

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Footnotes

[1]Condensed from a manuscript sunmitted for publication. Not to be quoted or cited without permission of the authors.

[2]The original form of the survey was developed as part of a project for the Illinois Office of Education, Department of Adult, Vocational and Technical Education, 1978. No members of the IOE staff were subjects in the present study.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance for Statement Groups

STATEMENT CATEGORY	SOURCE	df	MS	F
Common Usage	Between Groups	7		
	Sex	1	3.405	4.786*
	Age	3	.622	.874
	Sex by Age	3	.362	.510
	Within Groups	151	.711	
Common Phrase	Between Groups	7		
	Sex	1	11.816	20.284***
	Age	3	2.582	4.433***
	Sex by Age	3	1.030	1.768
	Within Groups	152	.583	
Sex Equity	Between Groups	8		
	Sex	1	2.381	5.065*
	Age	3	.138	.293
	Sex by Age	4	.529	1.126
	Within Groups	148	.470	
Sex Fair	Between Groups	7		
	Sex	1	1.595	3.554
	Age	3	.062	.137
	Sex by Age	3	.644	1.435
	Within Groups	142	.449	
Sex Biased	Between Groups	7		
	Sex	1	8.062	22.868***
	Age	3	.803	2.279
	Sex by Age	3	.173	.492
	Within Groups	144	.353	

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$